

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

The Parish Christmas Carol Service

The Revd George Bush, Rector

Thursday 20th December 2018

In those distant – forgotten – broiling days of summer, when it was all that I could do to water my roof terrace fast enough, to save at least some of its planting from the scorching sun, there was already disturbing news that the winter crop of Brussel sprouts was likely to be threatened by the weather. Not only does that vegetable attract fanatical supporters and detractors, but perhaps we may assume that a decent proportion of the population, given that veg's name, may for political reasons be under a self-denying ordinance, so that there will in fact be plenty to go 'round this year. In fact it seems we Brits consume all the brussels we produce and they are decidedly not for export; so no disloyalty intended. You will each have your own way of avoiding talking about you know what, or at least finding a safe space for it. In my decades of ministry I have sometimes gleaned that people seem to find Christianity a tad complicated; rites, ceremonies, doctrines, disciplines – but be you assured it is nothing like as complicated as Brexit!

Or – it would seem – as likely to inflame as much passion in our days – and doubtless we all deplore the tone of present public discourse. But that discourtesy was already in the air. A friend told me of a plan to display some modest drawings for a new village hall – but seemingly the shopkeeper who kindly agreed to exhibit them was threatened with bricks through the window. We all need to preserve proportion. Part of the task of religion is to name the ultimate – that which does not shift or deviate or change; and by so doing to indicate that other things are by contrast provisional, temporary and of less note. But we only live once and there is something about Brexit which, following on from the financial crisis, seems to have postponed prosperity – and hope even; as in a war our lives feel slightly on hold.

That is not an attractive way to be; it is said of the very first Christian monk, Antony of Egypt, who lived at the turn of the fourth century, that his daily refrain was, 'Today I begin'. Today note – not tomorrow or some day soon; 'Today I begin'. Waitrose might seem to have got the point with its 2018 tag, 'Christmas – too good to wait'; although in reality that may just be an injunction to eat more, sooner.

And current events have infected us all with a sense of urgency, with getting it right because we are running out of time; but that is not a perception that we generally apply to our lives, although we could do so helpfully; for it is the virtues by which we live which will enable us to die with grace and courage and the way we treat others is, says Jesus, the way we may expect God to treat us. We get hints of the urgency mind, what the Prayer calls 'the time that is left to us here on earth'. Someone turned to me at a very official City kind of do, when my clothes probably needed a bit of explanation, and asked if I had played a part in Winston Churchill's funeral. Well not without my teddy bear I wouldn't have. And on the vaster scale, the Astronomer Royal reminds us that we are half way through the expected life span of our planet and of course rather less than half way through human evolution; we may

wonder what we are becoming. Yet we seem to long for the sort of prosperity which will ruin the ecology even of that generous prediction. Climate change reminds us that our actions will have consequences beyond our times – but that is true of anything we do together to improve our world; we cannot do everything and must become in truth prophets of a future which is not our own.

Timing and courtesy deserve attention. Let's be clear what will emerge from the gripping and divisive debate will not be defined by the terms of some treaty, backstop or otherwise, ushering in a new age or at least burying an old one – rather it is how we treat each other in this and every debate and discussion which will define how we are as a nation hereafter. This is more than a welcome dose of seasonal cheer can address; although Sainsbury's tag, 'We give all we've got for the one's we love' – isn't bad -but doesn't quite go far enough (for we are not to stop at those we love surely!) and Tesco's, 'However you do Christmas - everyone's welcome' requires a bit of testing I should say! But it is perhaps worth tracing that seasonal cheer to its source.

Timing and courtesy. The point of any Christian doctrine – long before it angles for a place in the hierarchy of truth – the point is simply to draw us into endless love. The birth of Jesus is celebrated for its timing – at a certain moment and a certain place; it has the characteristics of a birthday, a famous person from an obscure place – historical and perhaps surprising. But is it precisely that which hides the courtesy because this birth might have gone wholly unnoticed and unremarked. Any gracious gesture, any act of kindness, any maturing of the spirit, any project of justice all involve a shedding of the self and a bending to the dignity of the other. To treat everyone, every human person exactly the same is an ambition, a daily discipline pressed by policies of equality and inclusivity, but rooted in the deepest instincts of Christian faith (if not always followed by Christians). For the appearance amongst us of the Christ child – the very substance of God under cover of our flesh is the endorsement of time, of the chance of the coming of the kingdom in this and every age, and is the ultimate courtesy – for in that God has bent to humanity and affirmed our best instincts.

I heard tell that during the most critical phase of the First World War, the U boat blockade was so successful, and the shortage of wheat so great that the Government specifically discouraged the rich from eating bread so that the poor would have enough. There is something more than charity or fellow feeling there – perhaps the admission that for one of us to flourish all must have a stake. We must reflect the timing and the courtesy of God or else our evolution will be stunted and our best instincts blighted. We must let the Christ child help us to identify him in each. Today I begin.